

Our Transportation Future Starts Today

Mayor Nickels remarks on groundbreaking for light rail Nov. 8, 2003

Fifteen years ago this week, voters of King County were asked a simple question: should we speed up planning to build light rail?

Cynthia Sullivan and I, as King County Councilmembers, sponsored that advisory measure, which generated a strong message from the public. Almost 70 percent of the voters said “yes—let’s get moving.”

We did. In 1996, voters of this region approved a plan and finances to build light rail. But since then, there have been setbacks over schedule and cost, talk about a re-vote, debate and litigation, and even a last-minute effort by an Oklahoma congressman to stop federal funding.

That’s now behind us.

Today, at long last, we break ground and start building a light rail system to serve Seattle and the region.

This is a milestone in our city’s history, and we should pause to celebrate and recognize its significance.

In a town famous for its traffic headaches, we begin construction of a system that gives commuters a convenient alternative to clogged roads. We begin a system that is critical to our 21st Century transportation network; and in that we lay the foundation for the kind of growth all of us want for this city and region.

This segment and future segments to Northgate and across I-90 to Bellevue and the Eastside will help form a system that will:

- Carry people in and out of our city;
- Serve future transit hubs at Westlake, King Street, and the ferry terminal;
- Connect people to buses, the Monorail, the South Lake Union street car;
- Serve transit and pedestrian traffic going east-west, between the waterfront and First Hill and other central city neighborhoods.

If you include progress on replacement of the Viaduct, the impressive breadth of this work on transportation comes into view. We are moving forward on what voters said repeatedly when they approved taxes for bus service, approved light rail and said yes to the Monorail. Over and over, the public's message was clear: do something about traffic!

We are. To get the job done, city government has formed effective partnerships, created a sense of urgency and an emphasis on results, managed permit processes efficiently, and worked cooperatively with the Washington State Congressional Delegation, the Legislature, the Washington State Department of Transportation, Sound Transit, King County and suburban cities.

The project we begin will bring a welcome alternative to our frustrated commuters, but we need to celebrate for another reason as well. Within 24 months, the project will employ 4,245 people, earning good wages. That's great news for the families who will benefit from those wages, the businesses who sell goods and services to them, and for our entire region's economy.

We saw with the Metro Transit Tunnel project, however, that construction puts a strain on businesses and communities. I'm determined that city government and Sound Transit work hand in hand to minimize disruptions, assist with any necessary re-locations and resolve problems quickly. And in the end, neighborhoods will be better off at the end of construction than they were at the beginning. To see that done, the city is contributing \$42.8 million towards the Rainier Valley Community Development Fund that will assist in construction mitigation as well as strengthen the cultural diversity, livability and economic opportunity of that community.

The benefits from light rail, of course, will be felt throughout the city. The hub system we are building will transform how our city grows and how we think about mobility.

The hub system will evolve along with new zoning and housing policies that serve two purposes: increase momentum for market-rate and affordable housing in the center of the city; and ease development pressure on our great single-family neighborhoods.

This month, we begin a process to re-write rules that guide development in the greater downtown area. As part of that, we will take lessons from Vancouver, B.C. Our

friends to the north did a great job of increasing the supply of downtown housing, making open spaces active and interesting, making pedestrians feel welcome, encouraging grocery stores and other services, and promoting good design. Vancouver did such a good job that people living downtown gave up their cars and downtown traffic declined.

Step by step, we are moving in the right direction— channeling growth into the greater downtown, creating transit links to a revitalized Northgate, South Lake Union and the University District, and using transit not just as a convenience but also as a means to provide economic opportunity for all. This work involves hard, sustained effort but we must get the job done, and we will.

We are making real progress on our traffic headaches. So today as we break ground on light rail, let's celebrate a moment that delivers on the dream of this great city. At long last, what we start will truly make a difference in people's lives.

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